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ABSTRACT

The dialect versus Standard English controversy continues in college composition courses. On the one hand, texts, handbooks, and workbooks usually emphasize Standard English while influential linguists point out the merits of dialectalism. One option for educators is to discuss alternatives in class. Students soon reject the extremes of eliminating dialect and eliminating Standard English, and the merits of bidialectalism and Standard English gain more consideration and general approval. The tension between professional directives and college/community expectations makes a further dilemma. One response is to stress bidialectalism using such techniques as oral pattern drills and planned speeches so that students may internalize the rules of the new dialect. That caters to the right of students to learn Standard English, a right that is future-oriented and prepares students to function after graduation in a social and economic world that may be very different from the one in which they grew up. Some oral techniques that are effective include oral presentations, using teacher composition models as the basis for class discussion, and personal conferences. (TJ)

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STANDARD ENGLISH VERSUS DIALECTS: ANOTHER VIEW

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I

A major hazard of teaching college composition is the dialect versus Standard English controversy which has been brewing ever hotter for the past decade. As a composition director, I am hardpressed to avoid the dogmatic standardism of written English as well as the uncertainties of chronically shifting dialectalism. On the one hand, composition texts, handbooks, and workbooks most often emphasize the canons of Standard English. On the other hand, influential linguists such as James Sledd and Wayne O'Neil vociferously disclaim the pat prescriptions of Standard English and point out the merits of dialectalism. Their position, of course, has been bolstered by the 3C's resolution of 1972 and its position paper of 1974, both of which assert students' right to their own language.[1]

One way I cope with this difficult dilemma in the composition class is to avoid either extreme. Instead, I discuss alternatives, pointing out four linguistic strategies--eradicationalism, reverse eradicationalism, bidialectalism, and Standard English--as potential strategies for the writer. A class is usually quick to avoid the elimination of dialect as taught by the eradicationalists. Reverse eradicationalism, eliminating Standard English, is also summarily excluded by the class. The merits of bidialectalism and Standard English, however, gain more con-

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sideration and general approval. By sharing these options with my students, I am allowing them to become more aware of and involved in the choices they need to make in their own writing.[2]

Following this discussion of possibilities, although we usually focus on Standard English in most of the essays, we also write one or two assignments in which the purpose of the essay requires a dialectal use of language. For one accustomed to a community dialect, such an assignment appears easy. To an affluent WASP, however, the assignment stretches the narrow confines of language to which he or she has been conditioned. Such flexibility avoids once again the "absolute" prescription so often found in the composition classroom; it does permit a more descriptive discussion of language based on purpose. Purpose defines the method in this approach: form follows function. For example, if my class is defining the abstract word "animal," their definitions and use of language will be quite different if they are writing the essay for their classmates or for their biology professor.

II

A more complex dilemma I face as composition director and teacher exists between professional directives and college/community expectations. Professional organizations tell me to give my students the right to their own language, that the view of Standard English as linguistically superior is myth. All dialects, as it has been shown by the linguists, are equal, each having its own set of rules and internal logic. But Pembroke

State University, the tri-racial college where I teach, stresses Standard English. Administration officials as well as colleagues in other departments are very concerned that students, having once finished freshman composition, can spell, punctuate, and use standard grammar. The community-at-large also exerts pressure on me as composition professor. Pembroke State is evaluated by the community in many ways, but one of its chief means of evaluation is measuring the way PSU graduates speak and write. If students cannot use standard English, that fact reflects badly on the college, on its composition program, and on each composition instructor.

My response to this problem-situation again seeks to avoid either extreme while taking both into account. My approach stresses bidialectalism. Obviously, I do not believe that bidialectalism is an impossible goal, as does Timothy E. Dykstra. I am much closer, in fact, to Joan M. Elifson's position that bidialectalism can be taught. By using such techniques as oral pattern drills and planned speeches, Elifson stresses cadence and sound of the new dialect so that students may internalize its rules. Her goal is to move students from monodialectalism to bidialectalism, to allow them a more self-conscious control over their speech and writing and the opportunity to learn Standard English as well as their own dialect.[3]

My own experience leads me in the same direction as Elifson. Her techniques respect dialectal models; they also emphasize the target models of Standard English. Elifson's

techniques recognize the diversity of language; moreover, they respect dialectal variations. Her method differs from other approaches toward Standard English, such as the one employed by Barbara Nauer. Nauer uses oral drills to eradicate dialectal traces while grooving Standard English patterns in the student's ear.[4] Such a method, though having some merit, seems too prescriptive, and Edited Written English is presented almost as a cure for black dialect patterns. The bidialectal method, on the other hand, does allow for variation. Like William H. West and Stephen H. Stremmel in Chapter Eighteen of their new composition text Exploring, Visualizing, Communicating (Prentice Hall, 1979), I believe that ideas, development, structure, and purpose are more important than using Edited Standard English. My students learn that dialects may be used when appropriate; so also with Standard English.

The very acceptance of bidialectalism, however, raises the issue of students' right to their own language. My response to this position is that they already have this right, one which they use and practice much of the time both in speaking and in writing. In fact, it seems presumptuous to think that we composition instructors, using three class hours of contact with students per week, could eradicate student dialects even if we wanted to. A much more realistic goal would be to increase student awareness of the options of Standard Written English, and to present writing purposes for which Standard English would be not only desirable but even essential. My emphasis stresses the students' right to learn and use Standard English as well as

their own dialects.

I would like to focus more closely on this "right" of our students. It is, I believe, a directive, a statement about future writing habits which, through our efforts, we strive to bring about. Thus, teaching Standard English is future-oriented; it prepares students to function after graduation in a social and economic world which may be different from the one in which they grew up. If the student chooses to learn this standard dialect, he or she receives implicit rewards--personal, social, and economic. The student, however, should have no false expectations that language alone will secure a graduate unlimited or even better opportunity. But even if using Standard English does not lead to personal advancement, such a directive is necessary for the advancement of society. As S. I. Hayakawa states: "In order that we shall continue to exist as human beings, we must impose patterns of behavior on each other."[5]

Some pundits might object that such an imposition effectively deprives students of choice. I think not. Although Standard English describes certain language patterns for certain purposes, it also allows students the opportunity to make that choice by providing them the knowledge of options. If we "Keepum Ignunt," keep them unaware of linguistic choices and fluency, we are depriving students of their right: the opportunity to choose language suitable for various purposes.[6] John Simon, addressing this same issue, concurs: "Unfortunately, there is no evidence that organized and cosseted ignorance leads to human liberation; it does, however, lead to diminished communication, increased

confusion, and lost confidence."[7]

III

I would like to further my argument by referring to several oral techniques which I have used in teaching freshman composition. These techniques may be used to illustrate either Standard English or the community dialect. As such, they demonstrate the flexibility of oral as well as written language. Such flexibility of language, based on purpose of the essay and audience to whom it is addressed, additionally allows the instructor and students to go beyond surface levels of language and to become more aware of language's deeper structures such as ideas, thesis, and development. These techniques, then, provide a very human learning experience which bypasses the prescription of learning composition for the sake of Standard English. They point out how writing can be a liberal art, providing options to students and true freedom in exploring thoughts and feelings.

One such method is the use of oral presentations. This technique involves student-written essays, verbatim delivery in front of peers, and in-class feedback. Before beginning this program, I provide students with handouts on delivering an essay well in any dialect and on evaluating its content. These handouts help the writer/speaker in delivering the discourse, and they stimulate the student-audience to be more critically aware of the speaker's content and presentation-techniques.

Toward the end of Fall semester, 1977, students who participated in such a program during that semester replied to a brief questionnaire on whether and how such oral presentations helped

them, especially in their writing. The following tables describe their responses to this survey.

Table I

Area I: Speaking as sequel to writing promotes:

Rank	Category	No. of Responses
1	greater self-confidence	18
2	greater interest in writing a good essay	11
3	greater concern for grammar, proofreading, editing skills	10
4	greater sense of audience	10
5	greater concern for style	9
6	greater interest in personal writing	2

Table II

Area II: Speaking as stimulus to writing promotes:

Rank	Category	No. of Responses
1	climate for better communication	5
2	greater use of writing models	3
3	expansion of knowledge	2

Table III

Area III: Speaking as side benefit to writing promotes:

Rank	Category	No. of Responses
1	greater understanding of people	8
2	greater class enjoyment	6
3	more opportunities for self-expression	6
4	speaking ability	3

Using this same approach in Spring, 1978, I issued at the end of the semester a more formal questionnaire consisting of fifty-six items and given to twenty composition students. Student responses to that survey indicated strong satisfaction with the use of oral presentations for improving writing and other skills. Student mean averages, derived from a choice-range of 0-7 (from no effect to great effect), indicate that most were satisfied with how oral presentations 1) encourage student-speakers to try harder to write a more interesting essay (5.86), 2) help student-listeners to appreciate the importance of using correct grammar (5.62), 3) expand student-listeners' knowledge of the various topics of essays read in class (5.62), 4) influence student-speakers to be more careful about using correct and/or consistent grammar, and 5) encourage student-speakers to write more specific examples and concrete details in their writing (5.62). Results also indicated that minority students consistently found the oral presentations more beneficial in all ways than did white students. Whether they were ranking responses as speaker or listener, whether the survey questions regarded cognitive or emotional effects, in each area, the mean student response of minority students in this survey was always higher than that of white students.

A second technique which I have found very helpful in teaching writing--whether in dialect or Standard English--is the use of my own composition models. With this technique, after distributing to each student a copy of my own writing and an essay evaluation checklist on the assigned essay-type, I ask

students to critique the essay. Students analyze it at home, write their comments, and return to the classroom to discuss its strong and weak points. Using the essay evaluation checklist which describes six areas of writing skills--thesis, organization, development, style and diction, grammar and usage, and mechanics--students discuss the essay's deep and superficial structures. Students tend to imitate the instructor's patterns both as to use of superficial structures like diction, grammar, and point of view as well as to imitation of deeper structures like organization and development of ideas. The teacher's ability to shift language according to purpose and audience encourages and demonstrates how students may exercise a similar approach in their own writing, once they have chosen a dialect in which to operate.

A third method of employing oral means to teach writing is my use of the personal conference. Last semester, for example, I taught a course called English Proficiency in which I used a number of different strategies in teaching writing to a group of eight remedial students. I employed such methods as lecture, language drill, question-and answer, analysis of terminology, and oral discussion. I also used the overhead projector to illustrate good and not-so-good student writing. Interestingly enough, however, the one method which these students thought most helpful to them was the individual conference. In such a one-to-one setting, the advantages of dialect or Standard English can be discussed in a very direct, individual way. Each student can begin to develop a personal sense of responsibility for

choices made in compositions as related to intended goal and audience. In addition, each student can feel more open in such a situation to share doubts, ideas, and future goals. Such conferences, obviously, provide humanitarian support as well as technical assistance to the student writer.

IV

In this essay I have discussed the problems of composition teachers in dealing with the Standard English/dialect controversy. I have suggested bidialectalism as a constructive compromise between the sole use of Standard English or dialectalism only and that between professional directives versus school/community realities. In my own composition classes, I use several oral techniques to demonstrate flexibility of language according to purpose and audience and responsibility in using language appropriately. By presenting composition as a means for expressing the whole person--body, mind, emotions, identity--students learn through oral techniques a variety of language expressions and a sense of freedom to develop fully their thoughts and feelings in writing.

Several particular oral methods I mentioned to achieve this holistic purpose are the use of orally presented, student-written essays, the use of teacher models--my own essays which provide patterns for discussing deep and superficial structures of the language, and individualized student conferences. All of these methods, it should be noted, present writing as a deliberate and thoughtful activity engaged in by people as one way of ex-

pressing ideas and feelings to a particular audience. The oral methods provide a climate conducive to such results. They help students to see how Standard English may be appropriate for certain purposes, how the community dialect may better satisfy other situations. These techniques also facilitate greater enjoyment and more purposeful student writing. Because of these many benefits, such oral activities reinforce the liberating aspects of good writing and provide a valuable resource in teaching writing holistically.

Footnotes

[1]For examples of the dialectalist point of view see James Sledd, "On Not Teaching English Usage," English Journal, 54 (November 1965), 698-703, and Wayne O'Neil, "The Politics of Bidialectalism," College English, 33 (January 1972), 433-438. The emphasis on Standard English may be found in such typical composition handbooks as Harbrace College Handbook, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, and Words, and Ideas, Wadsworth, 1972. See also the 4 C's statement on "Students' Right to Their Own Language," published by NCTE in Spring, 1974.

[2]I use a set of transparencies to discuss these four linguistic variations. My material is gathered from The Study of Social Dialects in American English by Walt Wolfrom and Ralph W. Fasold, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974. See Chapter Eight, "Social Dialects in Education," especially pp. 177-182.

[3]Timothy E. Dykstra, "Confessions of a Former Bidialectalist," English Education, 9 (Spring 1978), 148. Elifson's approach is found in "Teaching to Enhance Bidialectalism: Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations," English Education, 9 (Fall 1977), 11-21.

[4]"Soundscript: A Way to Help Black Students to Write Standard English," College English, (January 1975), 586-588.

[5]S.I. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978, p. 95. See also his discussion of directives throughout Chapter Seven, "The Language of Social Control."

[6]Mitchell J. Morse, "Keepum Ignunt," The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 22, 1979, p. 80.

[7]"The Waning of O'Neil," Esquire, January 30, 1979, p. 80.